

Swimmer's Itch

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Swimmer's Itch

Swimmer's itch is caused by human contact with a parasite that normally is found in some species of birds, ducks, or small mammals. In New Hampshire, ducks are the most common host. When this parasite gets into a person's skin it causes an itchy rash. The adult stage of the parasite lives in the duck's intestines. It is shed into the water when the duck excretes its waste. Snails feed off the duck's waste and release the young parasite (called cercaria) into the water. The parasite is commonly found at the water's surface and near the shore.

Who gets this disease?

Anyone who swims in water where this parasite lives is susceptible.

How is it spread?

Most commonly, the parasite (cercaria) is in the water film on someone who has just left the water. The parasite will try to burrow underneath a person's skin. The parasite dies after this. Someone contracts this infection from contaminated water; it is not spread from person-to-person.

What are the symptoms?

The symptoms include an initial prickling sensation after leaving the water followed soon by an itchy rash, which reaches maximum intensity in, two- to three-days and can persist for a week. Secondary infection with bacteria can occur.

What is the treatment?

It is best to check with a physician for treatment. Sometimes medication is given to ease the itching and allergic reaction. If secondary infection develops, antibiotics treatment may be indicated.

How can Swimmer's Itch be prevented?

1. Avoid swimming in known infested waters. Swim in deeper water. The parasite is usually found in shallow waters. Babies sitting along the shore are most vulnerable.
2. Vigorously towel your entire body immediately upon leaving the water. This will help brush off any cercaria that may be on the skin, also rinsing off with a quick shower may be helpful as soon as you leave the water.
3. Use a waterproof sunscreen. This forms a chemical barrier that may prevent the parasite from sticking to your body.

Who should be excluded?

There is no need to exclude someone from a day care facility since Swimmer's Itch is not spread from person-to-person.

Reportable?

No, Swimmer's Itch is not reportable by New Hampshire law. However, the Bureau's public health nurses are available for consultation.